

Monday, December 17, 2007

In addition to being called "Congressman," I had another illustrious title in my life.

I was the President of the Ron Swoboda Fan Club.

There may have been other Ron Swoboda Fan Clubs, but I'm pretty sure there was only one that I led and organized on my block in Wantagh. I rose to President of the organization at the age of 11 (being elected President of a group you started isn't difficult – especially when you are the only member.)

Some of you might not remember Ron Swoboda – there was a lot going on in 1969, including the landing of Americans on the moon, the war in Vietnam and the ascension of Richard Nixon to the White House. But let me remind you. "Rocky" played right field for my beloved 1969 New York Mets. He was a sturdy player and a decent hitter (even if a slow and ambling presence in the field). I don't know why I was so taken with him. After all, that was the team of Seaver and Koosman, of Tommie Agee and Cleon Jones and other notables whose names today generate instant recall, or at least a slow, dawning recognition followed by, "Oh yeah, I remember him!" I'm not sure whether Swoboda fits into any of those categories.

But there was something about him I liked. He provided a kind of "working class," blue-collar presence on a team of heroes. He was like the rest of us: he was never an all-star, he sparkled only occasionally but he always showed up and took pride in doing his job. In fact, he was the Major League player that most resembled my father and the other dads on my block in Wantagh.

Last week, former Senator George Mitchell released a 400-page report documenting widespread use of steroids and other performance enhancing drugs on every major team, including my beloved Mets. (I tell people that I don't care whether they're Democrats or Republicans, as long as they are Mets fans). Since the report's release, I've been thinking about my childhood worship of baseball and its heroes. I think of how I spent hours cutting stories and pictures out of the Newsday sports pages and gluing them to a '69 Mets scrapbook, about how pure the players seemed and how vivid the green grass of Shea Stadium appeared. I wonder how the Mitchell report will affect other 11-year-old fan club presidents—whether it's harder to grow up when the people you worship are accused of cheating - when the pictures of heroes that you glue into scrapbooks become mug shots.

I know it's politically correct to say that this is an earth-shattering, devastating, body blow to baseball. But baseball isn't about politics.

So let me say this: Stupid people cheat in all walks of life, in business, in Congress and, yes, in baseball. When that happens, they should be punished—not the institution. Last year, a bunch

of my colleagues were accused of corruption, but that didn't make the entire United States Congress corrupt. The same holds with baseball. We should punish the ones who cheated — indict and prosecute them if necessary. We should establish year-round independent drug testing. But we can't forget that the majority of players are like Ron Swoboda -- they show up, play by the rules, do the best they can and then move onto other lives.

In a strange sense, I wonder whether the stumbling of these heroes will remind young people that there is no perfection in life—particularly not among players who succumb to steroids or among umpires who make bad calls. Not among any of us. The best we can do is show up, play and work to the best of our abilities. That may not mean a place in the Hall of Fame but at least we will feel at home with ourselves.

Maybe that's the lesson our kids should be taught. Reject the pressure to be the fastest runner, the richest CEO, the hardest-hitting outfielder. Just be yourself. Then, steroids and enhancers won't be necessary.

One other thought: I remember in 1969 when the Mets were climbing in the standings, there were also cities in flames, riots erupting, draft cards burning and the daily agony of the Vietnam War. The entire fabric of America seemed to be tearing apart. One day, I heard my mother say, "Look, we've been around for almost 200 years. We'll survive this." That stuck with me, as I grew out of my Mets scrapbook (I did hold onto the baseball cards), into adulthood and even through 9-11.

Now, with the news media dominated by tales of steroid use in baseball clubhouses and hearings pending in congressional committee rooms, I'm hoping that baseball isn't tainted. I hope that these few abusers will be punished, but not the game. That the fundamental optimism of baseball, which is a part of the optimism of America, remains unshaken.